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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 DAMASCUS 000868

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/15/2029

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SUBJECT: SPECIAL COORDINATOR HOF'S DECEMBER 16 MEETING WITH  
FM MUALLIM

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (S) Summary: Syrian FM Muallim spent most of the one-hour conversation with Special Coordinator for Regional Affairs Hof lamenting the lack of progress in U.S.-Syrian bilateral relations. Muallim welcomed the possibility of a January visit by Special Envoy (S/E) Mitchell to Damascus, but stressed the need for S/E Mitchell to come in his capacity as "President Obama's envoy to President Asad" to discuss bilateral ties as well as regional peace. Muallim, citing the ongoing Knesset debate over a bill to establish a requirement for a national referendum to ratify any future peace deals, expressed grave doubts about Israel's desire for serious peace talks. He underscored Syria's desire for comprehensive peace, noting Syria supported the U.S. priority of re-launching Israeli-Palestinian final status talks. Syria, like the U.S., opposed the resumption of the Golan track if such talks were meant only to provide a diversion, he said. For that reason, President Asad remained determined to return to Turkish-facilitated proximity talks to secure Israel's agreement to a full return of the Golan before moving direct negotiations. Syria viewed U.S. participation in direct talks as a practical necessity, but the Syrian government sought improved U.S.-Syrian bilateral relations to bolster U.S. credibility as an honest broker. Syria, Muallim mentioned several times, would welcome a U.S. decision to allow Qatar to transfer an Airbus 340 it had offered as a gift to Asad. Providing permission for the transfer and use of "Syria's Air Force One" would signal U.S. desire for better bilateral relations and open progress on other issues.  
End Summary.

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No Syrian Interest in Track II  
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¶2. (S) Syrian FM Walid Muallim, accompanied by his Chief of Staff Bassam Sabbagh and an MFA note taker, opened the meeting with a report on a meeting that had just ended with World Federation of Scientists delegation led by UK House of Lords member John Alderdice. The group, Muallim said, had

asked how it could help in promoting peace between Syria and Israel. Muallim, waving his hand dismissively, said he told Alderdice that peace talks remained the business of governments; if private groups wanted to help, they should put pressure on Israel to engage in peace talks with its neighbors. Special Coordinator for Regional Affairs Fred Hof, accompanied by Charge and Pol/Econ Chief (notetaker), replied that Muallim's answer suggested there had been no change to Syria's opposition to track-II discussions. Muallim confirmed.

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Syria First Wants Better Relations with U.S.  
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13. After asking Muallim to pass along S/E Mitchell's and his own condolences to President Asad after the death of Asad's younger brother Majd, Hof reviewed U.S. thinking on achieving comprehensive regional peace and bilateral relations. He reiterated the President's and Secretary's firm commitment to the achievement of comprehensive regional peace and explained the U.S. had not altered its position on giving priority to re-launching direct talks between the Palestinians and Israel. At the same time, Washington remained fully committed to pursuing parallel tracks between Israel, Syria, and Lebanon. S/E Mitchell understood Syria's desire to return to Turkish-facilitated proximity talks before moving to direct negotiations with Israel, and the U.S. had informed Turkish FM Davutoglu that we viewed Turkey's role positively

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and had no objections, provided both parties agreed. Hof added, however, the U.S. wanted to avoid resuming Syrian-Israeli talks simply as a distraction to the Palestinian track. S/E Mitchell tentatively hoped to visit the region and meet with President Asad, probably in January.

14. (C) Muallim welcomed S/E Mitchell's visit but emphasized the need for Mitchell to come in his capacity as "President Obama's envoy to President Asad." U.S.-Syrian ties required urgent attention, he said. "Frankly, our bilateral relations did not achieve anything in the last year." Though the U.S. administration had expressed good will and intentions, there were no deeds on the ground. The only thing left from President Obama's speech in Cairo expressing a desire for better relations with the Arab world was the initial Arabic greeting "As-salam alaykum," he chided. Citing a string of examples of positive Syrian behavior (for which Damascus had received no credit), Muallim argued Syria had demonstrated a willingness to help coordinate on the Iraqi border and remained ready to cooperate; it was the U.S. who froze. Syria had played a positive role in supporting a stable unity government in Lebanon; "the Lebanese themselves recognized this." Syria also enjoyed better relations with Jordan. And it was Syria, not Israel, that was ready to negotiate seriously to achieve peace, maintained Muallim.

15. (S) Hof replied S/E Mitchell would be prepared to discuss a wide range of issues with President Asad. S/E Mitchell's mandate from the President, however, focused on Middle East peace, and it was essential that he engage Syrian officials on this primary mission. Hof asked Muallim for his help in arranging a briefing for S/E Mitchell on the methodology and rationale underlying Syria's position on the June 4 border and how Syria came to identify the six boundary points deposited with the Turks during the 2008 indirect talks with Israel. S/E Mitchell's desire for a greater understanding of this and other issues reflected the President's very serious commitment to achieving comprehensive regional peace, said Hof.

16. (S) Muallim replied better bilateral relations must come first. How else could Syria consider Washington as an honest broker? "How can I see you as an honest broker when you're sanctioning me?" he asked. "If we want to buy a screw with

10 percent U.S. content, then we have to send an application on a case-by-case basis. Is this normal?" Damascus did not question strong U.S.-Israeli relations, but the U.S. treated Syria "as an enemy." Unless there was a bilateral roadmap -- and S/E Mitchell had agreed to a roadmap during his July visit to Damascus -- "nothing will move. Nothing is moving." If the U.S. had decided not to move forward, Muallim appealed, "then tell us. We won't waste our time." The U.S. could signal its good intentions by helping Syria legally acquire an Airbus A-340 that the Emir of Qatar wanted to give to President Asad, Muallim suggested.

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Israel Creating Obstacles to Peace?  
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¶7. (S) Turning back to the subject of peace, Muallim said Syria fully supported the U.S. priority of bringing Israel and the Palestinians to negotiations and shared Washington's desire to avoid resumption of negotiations on the Golan if the talks were not serious. To show it was serious, Israel needed to agree to return to the Turkish-sponsored proximity talks and accept the previous Israeli government's commitment to a full withdrawal to the June 4 border. Muallim said there was no doubt in Damascus that PM Netanyahu represented the center of gravity in Israel's debate over peace. PM Netanyahu's silence in the Knesset debate over a law to

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require a national referendum to ratify any future peace treaties signaled that he was not serious. "Bibi needs to decide whether he wants peace," Muallim said. Instead of preparing the Israeli public for the possibility of peace, the government was taking steps to block peace.

¶8. (S) Hof replied he had heard serious discussion from Israeli officials about how to engage Syria. It would therefore be a mistake to interpret the referendum debate as a signal that Israel was not interested in peace. The debate over the referendum could well represent an attempt to divert attention from political pressure coming from the unpopular settlement moratorium, which the GOI had to enforce. Plus, argued Hof, it remained unclear whether the bill would actually pass. Muallim replied that only when Bibi demonstrated a willingness to "pay the price" of recognizing Syria's right to the Golan would Syria be convinced the Israelis were willing to move seriously.

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Bilateral Ties and the U.S. Role in Peace  
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¶9. (S) Asked by Hof to expound on the connection between U.S.-Syrian bilateral relations and the peace process, Muallim said the relationship between the two stemmed from America's historical role in the peace process as an honest broker. U.S. participation meant more than lending help to reaching an agreement. Practically speaking, U.S. participation was necessary for successful implementation, particularly in the area of ensuring security arrangements (Muallim specifically mentioned air and satellite monitoring). Important to America's role as an honest broker was the existence of good relations with Syria. Syria wanted to help Mitchell's mission by making "peace between Syria and the U.S." Better bilateral relations would pave the way for the U.S. to achieve peace. "We'll treat you as a friend, and it will help achieve your goals after peace," Muallim said.

¶10. (S) Muallim stipulated that Syria did not look to the U.S. to play this role as a favor because of the countries' bilateral relations. Syria would not hesitate to use another broker -- any broker -- who might achieve peace. Rather, the U.S. was uniquely suited to this role, and therefore better relations with Syria would be necessary for the U.S. to be a more effective honest broker. Palestinian reconciliation was not working, he argued, because Egypt was

not an honest broker and suffered a gap of confidence.

¶11. (S) Hof pointed out that many of the issues dividing Damascus and Washington were directly related to the state of war existing between Syria and Israel. Syria's relationships with Hizballah, Iran, and Hamas, for example, represented a source of friction with the U.S. that would require a peace agreement with Israel before they could be resolved. Muallim replied that from Syria's viewpoint these were all Syrian-Israeli issues.

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Back To Bilateral Relations  
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¶12. (S) Muallim argued part of the problem in bilateral relations stemmed from the lack of understanding by the U.S. Congress of Syrian behavior. He reiterated Syria was not blocking peace with Israel; Syria had played a positive role in Lebanon; Syria had received two U.S. military delegations and had agreed to a border security assessment initiative. The Administration needed to advertise Syria's positive behavior. Hof replied that Congressional influence was probably not the reason for slow movement in bilateral

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relations. The President had faced a number of domestic and foreign policy challenges in 11 months, including Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and others. Still, the Administration viewed Syria as important and wanted to get its policy right. There were ongoing deliberations about U.S. policy toward Syria, Hof stressed, adding Syria would probably see the results of this process before long. "God willing," Muallim concluded, "I hope so."

¶13. (S) In a private one-on-one session, Muallim urged Hof to work on permission for transferring President Asad's plane. Muallim agreed in principle to meet with Mitchell and Hof to discuss details of Syria's indirect talks with Israel but preferred S/E Mitchell make the request to Asad in private.

¶14. (SBU) Special Coordinator Hof cleared this message.  
HUNTER